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ABSTRACT

Using a critical approach to television viewing that considers the literary and rhetorical impact of the program examined, this paper analyzes an episode of the family television drama, "Little House on the Prairie." The paper examines the episode's plot, characters, themes, production techniques, sound elements, tone, method of story development, and dramatic strategies, as well as the implied audience and implied author. The paper then analyzes the actual audience for the episode, the issues it presents, and its historical context. The final section of the paper offers a critical commentary on the episode. (FL)

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Application of a Methodology for Criticism of Television to "The Stranger": An Episode of Little House on the Prairie

by

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Application of a Methodology for Criticism of Television to "The Stranger": An Episode of Little House on the Prairie

Little House on the Prairie (NBC) was originally the second in a long series of children's books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder loosely based on her pioneer childhood. In 1974 Little House became a regular television series. "The Stranger" is a one-hour episode first telecast on February 20, 1978, during the fourth season of the series. It takes place in the summer of what is approximately 1878. The regular characters are Charles and Caroline Ingalls who are in their early forties. Their daughters are Mary, about sixteen; Laura, about fourteen; and Carrie, about seven. Nils and Harriet Oleson, in their late forties, live in and operate the Mercantile, a general store in Walnut Grove. Their children are Nellie, about sixteen, and Willie, about thirteen. Other characters in this episode are Olaf Lundstrum, a wealthy Eastern businessman; Mrs. Caldwell, his mother-in-law; and Peter Lundstrum, his ten-year-old son.

The Plot

The episode opens at the Lundstrum mansion. Olaf Lundstrum is now a wealthy businessman, but when he was a child he worked with his father and uncles farming and building houses. Olaf's son, Peter, has been expelled from boarding school for cheating and stealing. Peter's maternal grandmother lives with him and his father. Olaf decides that his son needs to learn a "sense of values" and sends Peter to Walnut Grove to spend the summer with Olaf's cousin, Nils Oleson.

Unfortunately, Nils cannot control the boy, who becomes increasingly despondent until he vandalizes the Mercantile. Sending Peter to work on the Ingalls' farm proves to be the turning point of the plot. With Charles' strong, but loving guidance Peter learns the value of hard physical labor and develops moral strength and an understanding of personal responsibility.

The plot of "The Stranger" is unified primarily by didacticism. Elder Olson calls a drama in which didacticism is the ruling principle a "pièce à thèse: the action and the characters are designed to prove, by example. . . ."[1] In this episode of Little House, all aspects of the drama serve a didactic function. Not only are action and character designed to prove the themes but lighting, camera, color, settings, and mise en scène serve to reinforce them. The remainder of this analysis illustrates didacticism in this episode.

The Delinquency Theme

Delinquency is the first of two interrelated themes. According to the episode, parents must love and discipline their children to teach them proper values. Parental neglect of these duties contributes to delinquency in children.

The theme of delinquency is dramatized in interaction between the characters. In Act I Scene 1 when Peter tells his father that he has been expelled from school for stealing and cheating, Olaf largely ignores him. This is the first indication that Olaf may be neglecting Peter. When Olaf does not deal with Peter's problems but sends him to his room, Peter's face shows surprise and disappointment.

In Act I Scene 2 Peter's grandmother, Mrs. Caldwell, responds to his delinquent behavior by scolding him. She calls his wrong-doings "peccadilloes," treating them as minor offenses, and her behavior illustrates permissiveness in rearing children. When Peter arrives in Walnut Grove, Harriet Olson pampers

him. She carries Peter's luggage and tells him she will take care of him, unpacks his bags, and tells him to go out and play. Later she tries to protect him from bullies and begs Peter to eat his dinner. Finally, in Act II Scene 6 she tries to prevent Nils from punishing Peter after he has broken the store windows.

Evidence begins to accumulate for the theory that Peter may be behaving badly because he thinks his father doesn't love him. In Act I Scene 6 on the evening Peter arrives in Walnut Grove, Nils tries to console him thinking he's homesick and lonely with strangers. Peter tells Nils that his father won't miss him. He thinks that his father doesn't care. In Act II Scene 6 Peter overhears Harriet tell Nils that Olaf doesn't want him at home. Despondent, Peter says to Nils, "Pa doesn't want me at home. . . . Mrs. Oleson doesn't want me." Soon thereafter he smashes the windows of the Mercantile. His vandalism is a direct result of his belief that no one loves or wants him.

This theme is developed further when Charles Ingalls hires Peter as a hand on the farm. Charles' behavior toward Peter is that of a loving disciplinarian who refuses to indulge the boy. In Act II Scenes 7 and 8 Charles makes Peter sleep in the loft of the barn. He makes the boy carry his own luggage and threatens to whip Peter should he disobey. This is the first encounter between Peter and Charles on the farm. Subsequent interactions are similar. During their first day together, Charles strongly enforces his will on the boy and makes him obey his orders. But Charles is not exclusively a disciplinarian. That evening at dinner, Charles thanks God for sending Peter to him because he is such a good worker. Peter is visibly surprised by this praise. In Act III Scene 2 Charles praises the children for their work and rewards them with time out for swimming. He again orders Peter to participate. Charles discovers that Peter cannot swim and teaches him how by throwing him into the shallow lake. That evening in Act III Scene 4 Peter expresses gratitude and affection for Charles' guidance and attention, and Charles returns the affection.

In Act IV Scene 2 Charles makes the delinquency theme explicit when he tells Olaf that Peter behaves badly to get Olaf's attention. He accuses Olaf of not showing Peter that he loves him and of not knowing things a father should know about his son. In Act IV Scene 3 Olaf tells Peter that he knows he has neglected him and that he loves him and will change his behavior toward him.

Strategies. The delinquency theme is dramatized through two strategies, the most important of which is contrast. There are three fathers in this episode: Nils Oleson, Olaf Lundstrum, and Charles Ingalls. Charles' effectiveness as a father is heightened by contrast with the ineffectiveness of Nils and Olaf.

Nils Oleson is the owner of the Mercantile and is Walnut Grove's wealthiest citizen. It is evident that Nils has difficulty controlling his family and disciplining his children. In Act I Scene 4 he tells Charles that he fears that he will be unable to teach Peter a sense of values since he has been unable to teach that to his own children. Nils gets into public verbal battles with his wife Harriet and has difficulty keeping his children in line. Harriet is a frequent embarrassment to him, althoug when Nils asserts himself she will obey him. Nils is a good man, but he is weak. He finally has to call on Charles to help to control Peter.

In Act I Scenes 6 and 8 and in Act II Scene 6, mise en scène helps to establish the nature of the father-son relationship between Peter and Nils which can be compared to the relationship between Peter and Charles. Nils is trying to console Peter on his first night away from home. Peter is sitting on his bed facing the window. Nils is behind him standing. Their positions force a low angle shot of Nils over Peter's shoulder so that both faces are toward the camera. The low angle reinforces Nils as the father figure here, but the position with Peter's back to him seems to indicate that Peter is not willing to have Nils assume that role.[2] Peter rejects Niis' overtures of

kindness and fatherly advice. He is not consoled by Nils' words. His position in relation to Nils represents his attitude. In Act I Scene 8 after Peter has had his conflict with the local boys, the physical relationship between Peter and Nils is essentially the same. Peter is standing looking at himself in the mirror. Nils is behind him again. In the mirror, the camera shoots both of them with Nils reflected over Peter's left shoulder. Again, Nils is trying to console Peter, who will have none of it. In Act II Scene 8 after Peter hears Harriet say his father doesn't want him, the same physical relationship exists. Nils is trying to console him again, but Peter will not hear it. In these three scenes, Peter's unhappiness has grown steadily. First, he is unhappy because he is away from home with strangers. Second, he is unhappy because he has been treated so badly. Third, he is unhappy because his belief that his father doesn't love him seems to have been confirmed. Peter's rejection of Nils is represented by physical distance and relationship between them which reinforces the fact that Nils is not getting through to Peter.

Olaf Lundstrum is descended from Swedish immigrant stock. He seems to spend most of his time on his business and neglects his son's welfare. Mise en scène helps to create a contrast between Charles and Olaf in their roles as fathers. Act II Scene 8 and Act IV Scene 3 are examples. Charles has taken Peter to the barn loft to change his clothes. Peter is in the foreground unpacking while Charles is in the background on the loft ladder and is only visible from the waist up. The camera angle is high. His physical position in the frame is one of lesser power, but this is in contrast to his actual relationship of dominance over the boy. The dialog and situation demonstrate Charles' total power over Peter. During subsequent scenes Charles' authority is frequently reinforced with low angle shots which symbolize his actual power.

In Act IV Scene 3 we see Peter and his father. Peter is packing his bag, and Olaf is on the loft ladder visible only from the waist up. Olaf's relationship to Peter is changing. He has wronged Peter and is preparing to account for that. He speaks haltingly:

> OLAF. (Pause.) I'm (Pause.) hum (Pause.) I'm sorry there've been a lot of things between us. The reason why I sent you out here is I wanted you to learn what I learned in a place like this when I was a boy your age.

Seeing Charles in this physical position in Act II Scene 8 and Olaf in the same position in Act IV Scene 3 encourages the viewer to contrast the relative strengths of the two fathers. After Olaf speaks these lines, he climbs into the loft where the camera switches to a low angle shot which reinforces him in the rest of the scene as he becomes the proper kind of father for Peter:

> OLAF. Peter, look at me. Please, look at me, Peter. I haven't been a good father to you. I know that. I'm not gonna make any excuses because I just don't have any. I don't know (Pause.) why I work the way I do. I don't have to. Just like you don't have to steal at school. I'm gonna change. I'm gonna be a good father to you. (He starts to cry.)

Olaf, rather than trying to handle the problems of his son, initially decides to send him to spend the summer with the Olesons. Nils, who cannot control the boy, sends him to work for Charles. Charles' first important action in this episode is in Act II Scene 6, the pivotal scene, in which he stops Peter's vandalism. Charles conveniently enters the scene when Nils has lost all control, and Charles' relationship with Peter is one of discipline and control from the beginning. Charles' ability to take Peter in hand and guide him is contrasted to Nils' and Olaf's inability to do so. Nils knows what needs to be done, but hasn't the strength of character to do so; and Olaf, who wants to help his son, simply doesn't recognize what the boy needs.

It is Charles as the idealized father figure who indicates what is right behavior. His firmness and love are supposedly the main ingredients in the contentedness of his family and in Peter's rehabilitation. He doesn't take their goodness for granted but reinforces that behavior when it occurs. The camera angles often reinforce the heroic view of Charles Ingalls as bigger than life. In three different scenes Ingalls is filmed from low angle positions. For example, In Act III Scene 2 the children have finished sowing the field, and Charles is driving them home in the wagon. The children are in the bed behind and below Charles on the seat. The camera is slightly below the children and shooting upward to Charles' back so that he is the predominant character in the scene even though his back is toward the audience and the children are in the foreground. In this scene Charles is exercising his authority over the children, especially Peter. He chooses to reward the children for a good day's work by taking them swimming. When Peter declines, Charles orders him to go. Low camera angle reinforces Charles' role as the authority figure here.

In addition to the contrast between the fathers, the episode demonstrates the difference between children raised in an atmosphere of love and discipline and those raised in permissive and negligent homes. The chief function of Laura and Mary Ingalls is to show what a good father they have. In Act III Scene 1 they happily offer to help with the sowing, indicating that they enjoy working and have learned to respect hard work. They tell Peter how wonderful their father is and how he works hard all the time, but just as importantly, how "he's around when we need him." Laura, Mary, and Carrie are happy, well-adjusted children. Willie and Nellie Oleson, on the other hand, present a different picture. In this episode and in the history of the series, Willie and Nellie frequently behave badly, bullying other children, cheating in school, etc. Their behavior serves consistently as a contrast to the good

behavior of Laura and Mary, and the differences between children are attributable to the differences in the family structure and the role of the fathers in those families.

A second strategy used in connection with the main theme of the episode is identification. Some aspects of the drama reinforce popular beliefs about juvenile delinquency. In a 1973 article, Haney and Gold identify several popular beliefs about juvenile delinquency.[3] One belief is that juveniles either commit crimes for kicks and "macho points" or because they are melancholy loners. Juvenile delinquency occurs in a gang of five or more and the behavior "asserts the values of [the] subculture."[4] A second belief "sees a boy alone, troubled and disorganized, committing symbolic acts of aggression."[5] Analyzing their sample, Haney and Gold discovered that neither picture of the delinquent was accurate. "Neither loner or gang member is a type that includes many young people. By far the most common pattern was for delinquent behavior to occur as a 'pickup' game in the company of shifting numbers of friends."[6]

Although it is never indicated how many are involved, Peter's offenses at school are committed with several other boys:

> PETER. On Saturdays we'd go from shop to shop and lift whatever we could. Anyone who came back with the most got to be called artful dodger for the week. . . . Denevere got hold of the Latin quiz, and we memorized the answers. It was a lark, really.

Peter's statement reinforces the belief that boys commit crimes for "macho points" and kicks among their peers. In Walnut Grove, Peter's behavior fits the second belief of the delinquent described by Haney and Gold. He is troubled and disorganized, and his vandalism seems to be a symbolic expression of his unhappiness.

A third belief is that when parents do not attend to their children they are more likely to behave delinquently. Haney and Gold state that it is a

"common belief that delinquents are caught because they want to be caught, that this is indeed the reason they behave delinquently to begin with."[7] This seems to indicate that they seek attention which they are not getting from their parents. In this episode Charles accuses Olaf of not giving Peter enough love and of not knowing things a father ought to know about his son. He says that these are the causes of Peter's delinquency. Haney and Gold found that only three percent of the delinquencies actually committed were detected. Likewise, they discovered that "the common reaction to getting caught was not satisfaction but rather resentment and surprise," indicating that the children did not want to be caught and therefore were not seeking attention.[8]

Verisimilitude and plausibility. In his discussion of dramatic plots, Elder Olson enumerates several kinds of probability which make a dramatic event more plausible. One of these is natural probability meaning that the events observed are commonplace and likely to occur in everyday life.[9] It is probable that the situations in "The Stranger" could occur. Delinquent behavior among children is quite plausible as something that happens in many contemporary American families. Both permissive and authoritarian parents are also plausible. The relationships between fathers and their children in this episode are frequently found in contemporary society; therefore, they have natural plausibility.

Conventional probability occurs when a plot or an idea is familiar even if it may not be possible or probable in actuality. The familiarity makes it plausible.[10] The character of Charles Ingalls is a crucial element in the development of the delinquency theme. But I would argue that, as a representative of "real" human beings, he is not very convincing. He has no faults as a father. His plausibility derives from his conventionality as a character. We expect Charles to be this kind of father. We have seen him behave this way consistently in previous episodes. Because of our familiarity

with and acceptance of Charles as a conventional character, it is believable that he behaves as he does in this episode.

Camera angles also serve to develop the delinquency theme. The first shot of this episode is a low angle establishing shot of the Lundstrum mansion. The setting is a cliché of great wealth. The building is massive, built of brick. The low angle shot is maintained as an ornate, red coach passes carrying several uniformed coachmen. The first scene is in Olaf's office furnished with leather chairs, Persian rugs, and ornate knickknacks. As Peter enters the large office, there is a deep focus shot of Olaf behind a large desk which creates an image of great physical distance and barriers between Peter and his father.[11]

The Agrarian Life Theme

The second theme is that the hard physical labor of the agrarian life teaches one a sense of responsibility, respect for hard-earned property and possessions, and builds integrity. There is a causal connection between having to work with one's hands in the soil and the growth of moral strength. The virtues of farm life are frequently stated didactically. In Act I Scene 2 Olaf says that the hard work of farming is good and produces strong, moral character. In his agrarian youth he and his family made their own way. It is clear that Olaf works hard now to maintain his wealth. The implication is that hard work to enable one's family to subsist is virtuous while hard work to accumulate wealth is not. Olaf sends Peter to Walnut Gove "to find a sense of values." In Act I Scene 4 Nils repeats this message to Charles, "seems the boy has been in some trouble at school. His pa asked me to give him chores, make him earn his way, teach him a sense of values."

In Act III Scene 5, after Peter has worked with the Ingalls for some weeks, he learns that he has earned enough to pay for the damage to the Mercantile. When Nils asks Peter how he is, Peter says, "Fine, sir, workin' hard." The

condition of being fine is linked with the practice of working hard. In that same scene, Nils says, "I suppose you a.... you'd like to go back to the Ingalls?" Peter remarks, "If you don't mind, sir. He says he has more work for me." Peter is visibly delighted when Nils tells him to go. Peter seems to have learned that when one must work to sustain one's life, one develops both a respect for the work itself and a greater appreciation of life. Peter also learns that hard work does not have to be drudgery when one likes the work one does and takes pride in doing it well.

In Act II Scene 11 Laura and Mary are excited and eager to help their father plant the new field:

> CHARLES. I figure we're gonna be able to start seedin' in oh, three days or so.
>
> MARY. Can we help, Pa?
>
> CHARLES. Sure you can. With three of you workin' it'll get done real quick.

Laura expresses pride in the quality of her father's work in Act III Scene 1, "Our pa plows the straightest furrows in Hero township." The bridging shots, which enact the passage of summer, are of the Ingalls and Peter working together and are characterized by laughter and enjoyment. The music which is the only sound in the shots is fast-paced and joyful reflecting this happiness in hard physical work.

Strategies. A major strategy used to develop the agrarian theme, contrast, is most evident in the treatment of Mrs. Caldwell, Harriet, and Willie Oleson. Mrs. Caldwell is a matron in her late sixties. It is implied that she and Peter's deceased mother are members of a family of established wealth. Mrs. Caldwell's pronunciation is quite affected. Sometimes she lengthens her vowels and clips her consonants so drastically that it is difficult to understand what

she is saying. Her speech is indicative of the extreme affectation that is atereotypic of the English upper-class.

Caldwell manifests the vices of the wealthy class to which the agrarian class is contrasted. She believes that she is better than persons of the working-class. She does not believe in disciplining children but in pampering them. In Act I Scene 2, with an upturned head, she says to Olaf, "Do you propose to put a shovel in Peter's hands and set him to farming?" as if that would be beneath his station. She is exclusively one-dimensional and predictable, and her behavior never swerves from the stereotype. Her values, wealth, gentility, and social status put her in conflict with the prevailing themes of the drama.

Harriet Oleson is a regular character on Little House, and her actions frequently dramatize the vices of greed and affectation associated with social climbing. Harriet's first line occurs in Act I Scene 3 in which she is embarrassed by the fact that they have only an outhouse and assures Peter that they will soon have indoor "facilities." In Act I Scene 5 Peter gives Harriet and the children gifts he has brought. She tears open the package, as do her children, and expresses great delight over the expensiveness of her gift. "This is, this is from the Orient, I'm sure. It's pure silk, I'm sure it is." Likewise, she exclaims over Peter's velvet and lace knickers. She tells him that he will wear the suit to church on Sunday to "show Walnut Grove what proper folk wear." Harriet's affectations about the symbols of wealth are the subject of ridicule in Act II Scenes 2 through 4. She has ordered velvet knickers for her son and insists that he wear them. She talks about being "properly dressed," having "good taste," and having "manners and deportment" in quite a snobbish way indicating that she wants to show off to the people of Walnut Grove. But Willie hates the suit and calculates a way to ruin it almost immediately. Harriet's affectations are ridiculed in these scenes. In

this episode, Harriet is one-dimensional, always shallow, and materialistic. Her character serves to contrast the vices of affluence and greed with the virtues of the farming class.

The colors of Harriet's and Mrs. Caldwell's clothing reinforce their roles as representatives of the wealthy class. Mrs. Caldwell wears a purple taffeta dress in her first scene with Peter in his bedroom. Purple is a color traditionally associated with royalty and nobility. Harriet wears lavenders and blues. The color of her clothing is most significant in Act II Scenes 2 and 3. She is wearing a lavender blouse, a sheer, bluegreen apron with ruffles, and a brown skirt. She grates on our nerves just as the mixture of colors that she wears grates on our eyes.

The contrast between the values of the agrarian class and the vices of the wealthy class are also manifested in internal conflict in Willie Oleson. Willie, a secondary character in the series, is complex with human contradictions in his character. We first see Willie, a wiry boy about thirteen, teasing Peter about the outhouse. Willie's teasing is not malicious, however, and one can imagine the audience laughing with Willie at Peter's discomfort. Willie's knowledge and experience are those of a rural boy.

Willie soon demonstrates that he has the vices of the wealthy as well, however. In Act I Scene 5 we see Willie with his mother and sister opening Peter's gifts. He has obviously acquired the vices of greed and rudeness. When he discovers that his gift is a tie, he turns up his nose and ungratefully asks if he can't send it back rather than write a thank-you letter.

Willie is a sympathetic character who frequently manifests inconsistencies in his behavior that dramatize the conflict between his mother's values and those he has learned from his father and the community of Walnut Grove. Willie, like his father, has a history in the series of making the right decisions and behaving in an honorable manner when he is put to the test. In this episode

he serves primarily to dramatize the ridiculousness of Harriet's affectations. Willie hates the velvet and lace knickers as any red-blooded rural boy should, according to the stereotype. He quickly devises a plan to rid himself of the hated suit. Willie pretends to like the suit and asks his mother if he can show it to his friends. When he meets them, he tears the shirt of one of the boys, and they all proceed to tear his suit to shreds. It is plain to everyone but Harriet that velvet and lace knickers are a laughing matter, not something likely to arouse community envy.

Contrast is also evident in the settings and camera angles. In Act I Scene 1 the overwhelming wealth of Peter's home is established by the cliché of the mansion. Colors in the setting contribute to that effect. Peter's bedroom is light blue, trimmed in gilded carving. The curtains are a rich gold brocade. The low camera angle reinforces the image of wealth in the establishing shot of the mansion. The effect is not particularly positive. The house looks uninviting, not at all like a warm, loving home.

The two additional settings of major significance in the episode are the Olson's living quarters in the Mercantile and the Ingalls' barn loft and house. In the Mercantile, Peter's bedroom is blue and green. There is a carpet on the floor, but it is not nearly as nice as the Persian rugs in his home. The room is small, but the furniture is ornately carved. The bed and wardrobe are matching pieces. In the sitting room a velvet overstuffed chair and an organ are visible. The chair is decorated with lace doilies. There are drapes at the windows, and the walls are papered.

The Ingalls' home, by contrast to the mansion and the Oleson's home, is roughhewn. It is small; the walls inside are rough, unfinished wood. The furniture is handmade. The tableware is tin covered with blue enamel. Peter's bedroom here is the barn loft, and his bed is straw. There is no furniture, only a box in which he may keep his clothing.

These three settings serve to create a contrast between affluent and agrarian life styles, but it is only when we look at them in relation to Peter that the full extent of the contrast becomes evident. As the luxury of Peter's living quarters decreases, the quality of his relationships improves. In the mansion where he has the finest possessions, he is most neglected and misunderstood by his father and his grandmother. In the Oleson home, he is still misunderstood and poorly disciplined; but Nils is warm and kind and genuinely cares about the boy and tries desperately to reach him. At the Ingalls where Peter's sleeping quarters are the least ostentatious, he receives the most humane treatment. In these three settings the two themes of the episode enhance one another. The theme of the importance of a father's love and discipline to the development of a child's character is played out against the contrasting settings of wealth and of agrarian life.

Lighting also enhances this theme. Its most important role is in Act III Scene 3 and Act IV Scenes 2 and 5 which occur at the lake. The lake scene is an idyllic cliché, reminiscent of Wordsworth's pastoral poetry. The water is calm and inviting, completely surrounded by cropped green grass. Trees dot the shore, and there is a covered bridge over the edge of the lake where Plumb Creek flows into it. In each of the lake scenes, and especially in Scenes 2 and 5, a filter on the camera softens the light creating a romantic, pastoral image. The setting itself, with its natural greens, calm waters, covered bridge and soft lighting, strongly reinforces the beauty and rewards of a farm life.

The two themes of the episode merge subtly in the music. Little House has its own lilting, pastoral theme which, in various arrangements, provides background accompaniment for several scenes in each episode. In addition to the primary theme, guest characters usually have their own leitmotifs. In "The Stranger" Peter has theme music reminiscent of the classical music of the

eighteenth century. Peter's theme is played by the harpsichord accompanied by strings, usually violins. The harpsichord has strong associations with European aristocracy. The piano has largely replaced it in contemporary society and has become widely available to the middle-class as well. Music is used throughout to signal how we are to respond to or interpret material in the episode. The theme music with the harpsichord as the dominant instrument first accompanies the establishing shot of the Lundstrum mansion. As the episode develops, the melody itself becomes established as Peter's theme; but the harpsichord becomes established as a symbol of the wealthy class.

In Act I Scene 2 Peter's theme is played on the harpsichord. He is in his bedroom at home and his grandmother is questioning him about his problems at school. At the end of the scene after Olaf has decided to send Peter to Walnut Grove, the theme is played again on strings without the harpsichord. The same strings arbitrarily switch into the Little House theme to introduce Scene 3 and an establishing shot of Walnut Grove. The theme music at the beginning and at the end of the scene helps to create a transition between the two settings and to establish Peter's presence in both. The absence of the harpsichord at the end of the scene symbolizes the fact that Peter is no longer among the upper-class.

At the end of Act I Scene 8 after the encounter with the local boys, strings play Peter's theme slowly and in a minor key as he glumly looks at himself in the mirror and the Oleson's talk off camera.[12] The music creates an emotional mood to match Peter's feelings. In Act II Scene 6, in which Peter vandalizes the Mercantile, his theme is played in a melancholy arrangement with the harpsichord and the bass as the primary instruments. The harpsichord may be dominant because Peter's home problems are coming to a boil here.

Aside from the credits at the beginning of the episode, Act II Scene 7 is the first important occurrence of the Little House theme in this episode. In Scene 7 Nils takes Peter to the Ingalls' farm. Both the music and the action foretell a change in store for Peter. As Peter and Charles walk to the loft in Scene 7, Peter's theme accompanies them. The principle instrument is the oboe, and a bouncing effect is created by pizzicato violins. The lightheartedness of the arrangement prepares us for an improvement in Peter's life. As the interaction between Charles and Peter becomes more serious, the music also becomes more serious. When Charles threatens to whip Peter, a discordant guitar chord strums to reinforce the gravity of the scene.

In Act III Scene 4 Peter and Charles express their affection for one another. The piano, rather than the harpsichord, is the primary instrument in Peter's theme music. Charles is the dominant character in this scene, and he plays the role of a loving father. The piano also plays in Act IV Scene 3 when Peter and Olaf embrace as it played when Charles and Peter embraced earlier. The use of the piano creates a sentimental association between the earlier scene with Charles and the later scene in which Olaf promises to be a concerned and loving father.

Implied Audience

Based on the re-creation of this episode, the implied, intrinsic audience is composed of parents who hold traditional values. These include belief in a patriarchal father and in rigid discipline of children accompanied by love and affection. In the delinquency theme, the message praises fathers who love and discipline their children and reprimands those who neglect their children's moral development. Fathers who have not fulfilled their duties are also admonished to change and become good fathers, as illustrated by the change in Olaf's relationship with his son.

The implied audience for the agrarian theme is people who identify with hard physical labor. The working class is praised and the rich are scapegoated. There is consistent praise for those who work the land, for those who must make their own way, for the agrarian life style. The upper-class is ridiculed.

Actual Audience

Represented in the two themes are conservative, traditional values such as authoritarian child rearing, family stability, the patriarchal rule of the father, agrarian virtues, resentment of the wealthy, and the idea that money can't buy happiness or love. Many middle- and working-class Americans who are the implied audience, might be expected to accept such values. The Nielsen survey indicates that the actual audience of Little House is middle- and working-class. The percentages are based on the total television viewing audience during the time periods when Little House was telecast and are from National Audience Demographics Report.[13]

In the age ranges most likely to include parents, of all women between 25-54 years of age who were watching television, 19.4 percent were watching Little House. Of all men in that same age range, 12.9 percent were watching Little House. This is interesting since the primary audience for both praise and admonition seems to be fathers. It is also interesting to note that 30.3 percent of women over 55 who were watching television were watching Little House. In this episode mothers and grandmothers, except for Caroline Ingalls, are the objects of ridicule, not a pleasant image at all.

The audience of children for Little House is significant. In February, 21.3 percent of children between 6-11 years who were watching television during the time Little House was telecast were watching Little House. Although the major messages of the episode seem to be directed at adults, there are definite messages children can pick up about themselves. One of those might

be that parents are responsible for juvenile delinquency. Another message might be that parents who discipline their children are really doing so out of love and a sense of their own good, whereas parents who are permissive and indulgent are harming their children.

A larger proportion of the viewing audience in rural areas was watching Little House than in more urban areas. 31.5 percent of all households in the east central United States and 29.2 percent of all households viewing in the south were watching Little House as compared to 24.2 percent in the northeast and 20.5 percent in the pacific area. Data broken down by county size also provide evidence of larger viewing audiences in more rural areas. 32.1 percent of all households viewing television in counties with populations of 150,000 or smaller were watching Little House. As county size increases the percentage of households watching Little House decreases. Other data indicate that a large proportion of families with lower incomes watch Little House. As income increases the proportion of those viewing Little House decreases. Families who watch Little House are thus more likely to be rural and low-income than urban and high-income.

The Nielsen demographic data identifies the actual audience as largely working-class. The messages of "The Stranger" imply a working-class audience with traditional values. At this point evidence needs to be provided to support the argument that working-class people hold the traditional attitudes expressed in this episode. In his extensive study on fatherhood, Leonard Benson discusses the nature of patriarchy in contemporary society:

> Most of our leading ideas about family authority are derived from the value premises and myths of patriarchy. . . . Let us simply acknowledge that patriarchal ideologies have persisted into the twentieth century in all the major cultures of the world. One guiding principle is found in all of them: father is granted certain prerogatives in determining the activities of members of his family.

> Father's wishes are expected to take priority over those of his wife in a wide range of matters of common interest, although ad hoc compromise is inevitably called for.[14]

Benson indicates that the authoritative role of the father has been declining consistently in the last fifty years due to increased industrialization which takes the father to a job away from home and leaves the role of disciplinarian to mothers who remain at home.[15] Nevertheless, among working-class families, the role of father as an authority figure still predominates.[16] Benson stresses that belief in patriarchy may persist in spite of its actual decline.[17]

Although it has been argued that parents with traditional values are the target audience of this episode, the images of fathers and mothers in the episode are very different. The father is presented as and admonished to be the strong-willed patriarch. His role fits the evidence about working-class attitudes. However, the image of mothers does not. Harriet Oleson and Mrs. Caldwell are presented as indulgent mother figures with many vices. They are the objects of ridicule and become the foils against whom the drama of patriarchal authority is played out.

Caroline Ingalls appears in this episode only briefly on the morning of Peter's arrival at the farm, at supper on that same day, and on the eve of his departure. In these scenes she plays very traditional wifely roles. At dinner she is quietly concerned that the food may be over-cooked and won't please Charles and Peter. In another scene she plays the concerned, consoling wife to a worried Charles.

In all cases, the images of women are stereotypically sexist. Harriet is a nagging wife and indulgent mother. Mrs. Caldwell is a conceited, indulgent society lady (and mother-in-law), and Caroline is a nurturing wife. In no instance are these women placed in a position of real authority over the children, although even in patriarchal families, mothers play the major role as authorities for and disciplinarians of their children.[18]

Conclusions and Evaluations

The most noteworthy characteristics of this episode of Little House on the Priarie are its didacticism and its heavy use of clichés. Its didacticism implies a concept of the members of the audience as people who must be led through the statement of a problem to its solution. Inherent in didactic treatment of issues is an unambiguous and simplistic presentation of problems which are solved neatly and fully. The strategy of contrast is a form of didactic statement whereby the audience is told or shown through the comparison of stereotypic concepts or characters what is the proper stance on an issue. Secondly, the episode is characterized by a cliché use of music, color, settings, characters, and anecdotal actions (i.e. Willie's velvet knickers and Charles' method of teaching Peter to swim). Clichés are readily recognizable and carry with them all kinds of associations that are aroused by their presentation. These devices are especially effective at arousing stock sentimental responses which, when associated with the didactic presentation of messages, serve as strong, although logically invalid, rhetorical proof.

The history of the series and other episodes telecast during the 1978 season reveal at least on the surface that the didactic principle of unification is used frequently, if not exclusively. The images of women in this episode are consistent with their portrayal throughout the series. Harriet Oleson is always a selfish, class-conscious nag who is corrupted by greed. She is frequently contrasted to Caroline Ingalls who is the model of the nurturing, deferring wife and mother who almost never challenges her husband.

The images of men are also consistent. Charles Ingalls will occasionally show a weakness or flaw, but these are usually corrected within the course of an episode.

In other episodes the pristine virtues of the agrarian life are praised. Especially during the 1978-1979 season, the Walnut Grove farm community is

contrasted to the vices of Winoka in the Dakota territory. When Mary and her new husband consider moving to New York City, Charles and Caroline discuss the many advantages to raising children in a farm community.

On the whole the messages of "The Stranger" seem to be consistent with the themes presented throughout the series although more thorough inductive descriptions and analyses of additional episodes is necessary to confirm this. Nevertheless, it is difficult to argue that the impact of this episode would be negated by opposing themes, messages, and characterizations in other episodes. To the extent that these themes are reinforced in the series as a whole, it becomes a powerful persuasive force with great potential impact on its viewers.

End Notes

[1] Elder Olson, Tragedy and the Theory of Drama (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1966), p. 47.

[2] See Herbert Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1973), pp. 227-229 for a discussion of the use of high and low camera angles to create the illusions of weakness or smallness and of strength, power, or bigness.

[3] Bill Haney and Martin Gold, "The Juvenile Delinquent Nobody Knows," Psychology Today, Sept. 1973, pp. 49-55.

[4] Haney and Gold, p. 52.

[5] Haney and Gold, p. 52.

[6] Haney and Gold, p. 52.

[7] Haney and Gold, p. 51.

[8] Haney and Gold, p. 51.

[9] Olson, pp. 48-49.

[10] Olson, pp. 49-50.

[11] In a deep focus shot "all objects, located at different distances from the camera, appear in focus. . . ." The deep focus creates a depth of field that produces the illusion of distance. Herbert Zettl, p. 381.

[12] "In the evolution of Western harmonic practice, the major and minor modes have acquired a set of connotative meanings. It is generally assumed that feelings of happiness, hopefulness, and stability are stimulated by the major mode. On the other hand, it is believed that expressions of sadness, pessimism, and instability are created by the minor mode." Dominic A. Infante and Charles M. Berg, "The Impact of Music Modality on the Perception of Communication Situations in Video Sequences," Communication Monographs, 46 (June 1979), 136.

[13] National Audience Demographics Report (Northbrook, Ill.: A. C. Nielsen Co., Feb. 1978), p. 205.

[14] Leonard Benson, Fatherhood: A Sociological Perspective (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 90.

[15] Benson, p. 96.

[16] Benson, p. 107.

[17] Benson, p. 104.

[18] Benson, p. 96.

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